

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel Hubbard Bell, November 20, 1904, with transcript

ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL TO MABEL (Hubbard) BELL Beinn Bhreagh, C. B.
Sunday, November 20, 1904. Mrs. Alexander Graham Bell, Twin Oaks, Woodley Lane,
Washington, D. C. My darling Mabel:

For the last few days I have been looking forward to Sunday as my day of rest. I have said to myself "That is Mabel's day" and I will devote the whole day to writing to Mabel, Elsie, Daisy and Bert — but — "the plans of mice and men" as Burns remarks "gang aft a'glee."

I found on rising about noon — that this is the birthday of Myrtie Mace; and Mr. McCurdy, Hattie and the baby — as well as Lina McCurdy were downstairs ready for an early dinner to celebrate the event. Under the circumstances I could not shut myself away and so I have spent the whole afternoon and evening en famille. Lina read us her paper on Animals which she presented to the Ladies Club — and found an appreciative audience. Then I talked and read myself DRY for the benefit of my father and others — said goodnight early — and came upstairs for a cool smoke on Daisy's verandah — before retiring to study — But — John McKillop had come to see me about Sheep Department and that lost me some time. At last I succeeded in cooling off quietly and alone in the beautiful moonlight and fresh cool air — wondering how you in Washington have enjoyed the blizzards and snowstorms that have not come here . You'll have to come up here to get warm.

2

We have had cool weather — but very little ice — and a mere trace of snow. The last two or three days have been wet and foggy but not cold. This evening is fine — but cloudy — cool and bracing but not cold. Glimpses of blue sky between fleecy clouds that have been forming under my eyes — above them I mean. I have had a fine view of the moon and Jupiter through the field-glasses we nearly lost in Honolulu. I get more satisfaction out of

Library of Congress

these glasses than the large telescope. There is so much to do and so little to see in the Observatory that I rarely go there — but there is hardly a night that I do not have a look through the field-glasses on Daisy's verandah.

I have been on the look out every night for an Aurora — but nothing has appeared save the one I failed to see on October 7th — Daisy's Aurora — unless it has come during cloudy weather.

After cooling off on verandah — I undressed and put on my dressing gown, as preparation for study — but went into bathroom for a weigh — au naturel .

My weight is now 234 pounds instead of 247 — a loss of 13 pounds. This cool, bracing air, I thoroughly enjoy. It is a pleasure to walk — and walk briskly too — and the exercise is having its effect upon my weight — which is gradually coming down to a reasonable figure for one of my height. I hate to think of Washington and the physical degeneration that is sure to overtake me there. Were it not for your mother and all the dear ones there — Washington would see me no more — in spite of the fact that I enjoy the men in Washington — and feel a mental stimulus in their society. Here, however, I am always well — at least in the cool season — and now my general health is as good as it possibly can be. The only drawback to comfort is the local trouble of which you know — which is certainly no better. I am afraid it is now a permanent condition — that can only be relieved by surgical or at least instrumental treatment.

Surely Dr. Sowers must know of some instrument for dilatation — to avoid the barbarous method of surgical interference — to which I am much opposed. A little rubber ball, the size of a pea — that could be blown up and worn continuously — would certainly in time remedy the trouble. The crude arrangement I have been trying here shows that. If I could only obtain a dilator small enough and light enough to be worn continuously I am sure I would be all right. Other men have suffered from the same trouble — and surely the medical profession must possess a suitable dilator to remedy the condition

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without an operation. I certainly could have a suitable apparatus made for myself — if I could be set in communication with some firm who would make it. Perhaps Dr. Sowers can supply me with the name of some firm accustomed to make soft rubber goods for the medical profession. The contrivance I am now using is impracticable because it is so inconvenient that it can only be used occasionally — and that won't do at all. The mechanical dilatation must be kept up continuously and gently to be effective — and I haven't the patience to attend to my own needs in this way. A light apparatus that could be worn (all the time if necessary) — and that could be easily removed and easily replaced — would remedy the whole matter in a few weeks. What is wanted is:

1st. A ball of thin rubber about the size of a pea with protruding rubber nipple for attachment to rubber tube.

2nd. Rubber tube about 2½ feet long with metallic end piece that can easily be inserted in rubber nipple. By means of mouth applied to other end of tube — rubber ball can be blown up to desired size. Rubber nipple can then be squeezed with the fingers and tube withdrawn. It is only necessary then to close opening in rubber nipple to prevent escape of air. It can be tied (awkward and therefore impracticable) — or clamped (better — but clamp must be light) or plug inserted (best because lightest) — and there you are!

Rubber blow-tube can be coiled up and carried in the pocket. Dilated rubber ball with orifice in nipple plugged by light plug of aluminum can be worn continuously. Plug can be easily removed when desired — and collapsed ball withdrawn.

But enough about self — I am all right excepting for a feeling of mortification and humiliation at the local trouble I am experiencing.

We are all well here — but I am much troubled by my 5 father's weakness. He is not in a condition to stand a long journey to Washington at the present time — and I am perplexed to know what to do. He seems to be happy here — but hardly says a word. He likes to

Library of Congress

have me sit beside him and looks forward pathetically to the evening — when he knows I will give him all my time.

For several days past he has taken a fancy to staying in bed — didn't want to get up — and slept nearly all the time. Somewhat feverish at night but claimed to be perfectly well. Dr. Macdonald had a look at him on Wednesday evening — for I felt troubled that he did not have energy enough to want to attend the men's meeting last Wednesday. He enjoys these meetings very much — but last Wednesday preferred to stay in bed. Mrs. Bell reports that he has a sore place that interferes with his comfort in sitting down — but I will spare you the details! She thinks that this is the reason he has spent several days in bed. The position is easier and he has no pain. I had Dr. Macdonald examine the sore — and he reports that it is nothing to be troubled about — and that if he desires to rest in bed — it is the best thing for him — so we have not urged him to rise.

Yesterday afternoon he went into the library for a little while — but Charles and Everett had an awful time getting him back again. His knees gave way and he could not walk and they had — practically — to carry him to bed. And yet he says he is perfectly well!

6

This weakness troubles me — and I fear the long journey to Washington. I have had Mr. Mitchell write to the Railroad Authorities to see whether we could obtain a private car — to take us from the Grand Narrows to Boston without change. This would greatly reduce the fatigue of the journey — and then we can go right through to Washington from Boston without change . I must say — that after our experience this summer — I dread the journey for my father. Although claiming to be perfectly well, his physical weakness is so great — and his somnolency too — as to make me fear that he may not be long with us. It is a great comfort to me to be able to be with him now — and a great happiness that he wants me and craves for my society. I miss you and the children sadly though. Elsie has her husband and children with her. Daisy her liberty — her ambition and her work. You too — I feel must be as glad to be alone with your sweet mother for a little while — as I am —

Library of Congress

to be alone with my father. Let us be happy while we can. Sad changes will come soon enough — but we need not make the time that is ours now — unhappy — by brooding and worrying. With a bright smile — and love in our hearts — we can smooth the downward path — without looking too much ahead.

I can't write more now — my sweet little wife — so good night for the present.

Your loving husband, Alec.

7

P. S. My father got up to dinner — and has remained up all day. He seems stonger today — and says he is perfectly well. He walked to and from his room with slight assistance and a “1,2,3, and away.” AGB.